United Nations E/1998/65/Add.3

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
12 June 1998

Original: English

Substantive session of 1998
New York, 6-31 July 1998
Item 10 of the provisional agenda*
Regional cooperation

Regional cooperation in the economic, social and related fields

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

Letter from the Chairman of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at its fifty-fourth session to the President of the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1998

The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), at its fifty-fourth session, held from 16 to 22 April 1998 at Bangkok, considered a report prepared by the ESCAP secretariat entitled "The role of ESCAP in the promotion of economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific: draft ESCAP position paper for review by the Economic and Social Council". The Commission requested its chairman to transmit a letter, together with the relevant portion of the report, to the President of the Council and to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

* E/1998/100

98-16673 (E) 250698

Letter dated 18 May 1998 from the Chairman of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at its fifty-fourth session addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1998

In follow-up to the Secretary-General's recommendation and the General Assembly's subsequent decision that the Economic and Social Council, at its July 1998 session, should initiate a general review of the regional commissions, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), at its fifty-fourth session, held from 16 to 22 April 1998 at Bangkok, considered a report prepared by the ESCAP secretariat entitled "The role of ESCAP in the promotion of economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific: draft ESCAP position paper for review by the Economic and Social Council". At the conclusion of its consideration of that report, the Commission requested me, in my capacity as Chairman of the Commission, to transmit a letter, together with the relevant portion of the report, to the President of the Council and to the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

I would draw to your attention the continuing efforts of the Commission to review and to revise its conference structure, with the objective of rationalizing, streamlining and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of its work, to enable it better to tackle the complex development issues faced by the countries in the region into the next millennium. Particular reference is made to the Commission's resolutions 48/2 of 23 April 1992 and 53/1 of 30 April 1997 on restructuring the conference structure of the Commission and to relevant General Assembly resolutions.

In its discussion of ESCAP's continuing reform effort, the Commission emphasized certain areas for further action and, in particular, decided to:

(a) Rationalize its work programme, based upon its core competencies;

(b) Further strengthen project monitoring and self-evaluation of both ongoing and completed projects on a systematic basis;

(c) Further reduce the percentage of resources devoted to programme support activities;

(d) Within the work programme, redeploy resources from meetings and publications to technical assistance activities;

(e) Promptly implement the recommendations of the Office of Internal Oversight Services.

In the course of its deliberations, the Commission voiced strong support for ESCAP's mandate as "team leader" for the United Nations system in the economic and social fields in Asia and the Pacific and its role as convener of the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific (RICAP). In consequence, the Commission invites the Council to direct the organizations of the United Nations system to respect the regional mandate of ESCAP in exercising team leadership and responsibility for coordination and cooperation at the regional level and its mandated role in technical assistance activities.

In bringing the above to your attention, may I invite you to disseminate, as an official document of the Economic and Social Council, copies of this letter to the members of the Council so that during its deliberations on the review of the regional commissions, full account may be taken of the genuine desire and continuing commitment of the members and associate members of ESCAP to pursue all possible courses of regional economic and social cooperation within the framework of the Charter of the United Nations. Furthermore, may I invite you to bring to the attention of the Council the concerns of the Commission

contained in the attached report and to make the necessary recommendations towards a Council decision that would enable the regional commissions effectively and efficiently to discharge their responsibilities.

(*Signed*) Surin **Pitsuwan**
Chairman of the Economic and Social Commission
for Asia and the Pacific at its fifty-fourth session

Annex

Follow-up to ESCAP resolution 53/1 of 30 April 1997 on restructuring the conference structure of the Commission

1. The Commission had before it document E/ESCAP/1083, which focuses on the restructuring of the conference structure of the Commission.

2. The Commission welcomed the measures taken so far on ESCAP reform. It reiterated that the process of reform was ongoing and should aim to sharpen the focus of work of the Commission, based on its comparative advantage, and to improve its ability to meet the evolving priority needs of the region efficiently and effectively.

3. The Commission noted that ESCAP had been engaged in the reform exercise over a considerable period of time. Those reform efforts needed to be pursued in the broader context of economic and social developments in the region and the Commission's ability to respond, in an adequate and timely manner, to emerging problems. In keeping with the times, ESCAP needed to continue adjusting itself to changing circumstances and conditions to ensure that it remained relevant and responsive to the needs of the membership.

4. The Commission emphasized the need to devise clearer objectives in the activities of ESCAP and to set time-frames to achieve those objectives. The regular monitoring and impact assessment capabilities of ESCAP needed to be strengthened. In addition, the results of the questionnaire on priorities and resource allocation should be reflected in the programme planning and budgeting process as soon as possible. The Commission recommended that the activities and services offered by ESCAP, and its success stories, be made more widely known, by both the secretariat and member Governments. It welcomed the revival of the ESCAP Publications Committee, which would serve to control the quality and quantity of publications under the regular budget, with a view to redeploying some resources to training and technical assistance activities.

5. The Commission noted the usefulness of the recent informal consultations of the Economic and Social Council at United Nations Headquarters, which had served to bring together the Executive Secretaries of the five regional commissions, and suggested that the information in respect of the reforms of the other regional commissions should be made available to ESCAP members. In response to a query concerning the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the regional commissions, the secretariat pointed out that the proposed revision to the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001 would streamline the secretariat's programme structure to 7 subprogrammes from 10. The secretariat would be restructured to correspond to the revised programme structure. The secretariat informed the Commission of its effort to further reduce programme support costs, including the redeployment of posts from programme support areas to programme areas.

6. In endorsing the revised programme structure, the Commission emphasized the need to take into account the ongoing process of United Nations reform to avoid duplication by concerned organizations and to ensure greater complementarity in their programmes and activities. The possibility of holding sessions of some of the legislative committees every two years was also raised. The secretariat explained that any change to the conference structure would have to be discussed by members and associate members and approved by the Commission.

The role of ESCAP in the promotion of economic and social development in Asia and the Pacific: draft ESCAP position paper for review by the Economic and Social Council

7. The Commission had before it document E/ESCAP/1084, which examined the contribution of ESCAP to the region's economic and social development, the relations between ESCAP and its development partners, and the challenges facing ESCAP in preparing for its continuing role in the twenty-first century. It had been prepared by the secretariat in response to the Secretary-General's recommendation that the Economic and Social Council should initiate a general review of the regional commissions.

8. The Executive Secretary reported to the Commission that, at the informal consultations on the review of the regional commissions, held in New York on 12 March 1998, a number of pertinent outcomes had emerged. First, it had been recognized that the regional commissions had undertaken serious, broad-based reform but needed to respond further to changing circumstances within their respective regions. It had also been found that there was a need to establish better linkages between the regional commissions and the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, the Bretton Woods institutions, other regional groupings, civil society and the private sector. The three-way linkage between the regional commissions, delegations at United Nations Headquarters and Governments in the capitals also needed to be strengthened. There was a continuing need for a better balance between the operational role of the regional commissions and that of the other United Nations bodies and agencies. The consultations also concluded that the regional commissions had a role to play in the follow-up to global conferences and in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

9. The Commission found that document E/ESCAP/1084 gave useful background and guidelines and correctly highlighted the comparative advantage of ESCAP, particularly with respect to its interdisciplinary orientation. Strong support was voiced for the mandate of ESCAP as "team leader" for the United Nations system in the economic and social fields in Asia and the Pacific. The Commission also suggested that it should lead, or at least mirror, the reform taking place in the United Nations system. A number of delegations expressed their strong support for the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific and the role of ESCAP as convener and coordinator of that body. Particular value was accorded to the role of the Committee in avoiding unnecessary duplication and increasing the synergy and complementarity among the programmes of work of the respective entities. It was also pointed out that the coordination role of ESCAP should extend beyond the United Nations system to include other regional and subregional organizations in order to achieve optimal use of existing resources. That process could also serve to ensure that the most efficient division of labour among the various concerned entities would prevail. In that regard, while ESCAP should endeavour not to duplicate the mandates of other United Nations bodies and agencies, those organizations should, in turn, respect the regional mandate of ESCAP. Some delegations considered that the document reflected traditional arguments instead of providing a useful input for the review being undertaken by the Economic and Social Council as part of the reform in the United Nations system. The possibility of expanding the membership of the Regional Inter-agency Committee for Asia and the Pacific to include regional economic organizations was raised.

10. In considering operational activities, the Commission emphasized the need to continue forging strategic alliances between ESCAP and other United Nations bodies and agencies, and with other relevant organizations in the region. The Commission emphasized that resources, including regular budget resources, should be directed more to operational

activities than to meetings and publications. In order to define more clearly the priorities of the Commission's work programme, it was urged that members and associate members who had not yet done so should complete the questionnaire on resource allocation which had been circulated by the secretariat in February 1997. That was considered especially important in view of the current decline in extrabudgetary funding, which had in the past been a major source of support for the Commission's operational activities. With further reference to operational activities, it was suggested that non-governmental organizations should be given more opportunities to participate in the Commission's technical assistance projects.

11. The Commission expressed the view that members and associate members should make a greater effort to coordinate and exchange information between their representatives at the regional level and their counterparts at United Nations Headquarters in order to increase understanding of the role of ESCAP and the nature of its reform process, given its remote location from New York. In addition, such improved coordination could assist in identifying more precisely the requirements of the Commission with respect to the regular budget allocation and to ensure that decisions made in New York would be relevant to the real needs at the regional level. It was suggested that the Commission should take into account the reforms being conducted by other regional commissions to assist with the ESCAP reform process.

12. At the conclusion of the debate, the Executive Secretary explained that inputs from all of the regional commissions, including the finalized version of document E/ESCAP/1084, would be consolidated in the report of the Secretary-General for review by the Economic and Social Council at its July 1998 session. The Commission felt strongly that it would be useful for its views on the reform of ESCAP to be presented directly to the members of the Council and expressed concern that the contents of the ESCAP position paper might be diluted by being incorporated in the consolidated report. It was therefore agreed that the Chairman of the Commission would be invited to transmit to the Secretary-General and the President of the Council a letter detailing the views and concerns of the Commission.